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## Bone of my Bone

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*Bone of My Bone*

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*Bone of My Bone*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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## Abstract

This is a noticing and a return - a good old-fashioned call and response.

An understanding and a becoming.

At present, the noticing is on brokenness and the response on reparation. The work is filtered and guided through my background in traditional woodworking and furniture design.

A lifetime love of comic books, storytelling, and illustration refuses silence, and it escapes in bursts as I work intuitively through design and material. A newly discovered love of writing finds meaning in that intuition.

It's impossible, even irresponsible, for me to notice and question the brokenness around me without questioning the brokenness within me. It's cyclical. The noticing becomes self-examination; the response becomes self-discovery.

By leaving my surroundings in a more secure, joyful state than I found them, I am assured of the following:

They have been revived; given the opportunity to thrive once more in my absence.

I am leaving better too.

## I. Home

*"My head is spinning 'round.*

*My heart is in my shoes.*

*I went and set the Thames on fire,*

*Now, I must come back down.*

*She's laughing in her sleeves, boys.*

*I can feel it in my bones.*

*But anywhere I lay my head,*

*I'm gonna call my home."*

*Anywhere I Lay My Head* - Tom Waits. September 30, 1985.

My home has never wandered. My grandfather built it. The front porch is cast concrete. If you spent a little time with a buffing wheel and some compound, it would shine up to a mirror polish with ease. Towards the end of middle school, Mom and Dad had a walkway paved around the porch, framing a previously rambunctious flower bed. Around the house, I went without shoes as often as possible. I still love the feeling of cold, wet soil coming in contact with the soles of my feet. On my first venture on the new sidewalk, I sliced open the bottom of my right foot. A reminder from the world that the unknown is dangerous. The pavers had left the surface horrendously sharp and jagged, a cottage-cheese texture of gravel and razor blades. As I hobbled back inside trying not to drive any foreign bodies into the wound, I streaked the concrete with an undulating line of red.

*"Welcome to the family. Here's my sacrifice."*

Irritated, I asked Dad when he came home why the pavers had left their work unfinished.

"Why hadn't they matched Papa's work?"

"Well Pick,' he said, 'they aren't Papa. I remember him saying to his crew, 'Make sure it's flat and smooth! I don't want my grandbabies skinning their knees.' I think he still had the final pass. He had to make certain everything was up to his standard."



The completion of our house, the original front porch and all, preceded my brother by a year and me by an additional three.

Love leads to service. Echoing David Foster Wallace's *This Is Water*, our lives are worship. The subject of our worship shifts, but we all worship, and it always requires sacrifice. Devotion is another name for it. Loyalty, faithfulness, dedication. In some instances, the love may turn unexpectedly prophetic.

Though there were no "grandbabies" when the construction was completed, the love was already there, patiently awaiting its cue.

Papa was already saying, "Welcome to the family. Here's my sacrifice."

Richmond isn't home. The apartment Kaylee and I are in is more cave than apartment, with two floor-to-ceiling windows that open to interior hallways within the complex. Natural light is scarce. Nothing green stays that hue for long. The studio became a home of sorts. I thought I could hide out there, make work, and go along my merry way. Then I started noticing little bits and bobs around the house (read as, "studio") that were falling into disrepair. Critique room walls were neglected by busied schedules and stressed minds. Stools and chairs began failing at the welds and joints. The damage didn't happen instantaneously. I just finally saw them. By noticing the brokenness, I then felt the responsibility to respond, and my practice began answering the call through the work of the Studiomobile. As its name suggests, it was a mobile studio that I outfitted to carry the tools necessary to perform whatever repair was needed. The tools could be swapped out rapidly through the use of a French cleat system. The Studiomobile's first venture out led to flattening, patching, and reviving one of the walls in the critique room. No one could skin their knee on that wall once I was done. My work wasn't isolated or insulated in the studio anymore. It started pouring outwardly.

The sacrifice was smaller and new.

Still, I was saying, "Welcome to the family. Here's my sacrifice."

## II. Sacrifice

*"There was a boy.  
A very strange enchanted boy.  
They say he wandered very far,  
Over land and sea.  
A little shy and sad of eye,  
But very wise was he.  
And then one day,  
A magic day he passed my way.  
And while we spoke of many things,  
Fools and kings,  
This he said to me,  
The greatest thing you'll ever learn  
Is just to love and be loved in return."*

*Nature Boy* - Nat King Cole. August 22, 1947.

So sacrifice and love become fuzzy, entangled together in an indiscernible lump. I can love things. I love peanut butter, but neither party is forfeiting a portion of itself or its faculties to the other. And peanut butter is not sentient. Here's a bold claim: love without sacrifice is faulted.

I remember the first time I cried for something beyond the trivialities of youth. My great Aunt Barbara had been a heavy smoker her entire life. I recall her booming laughter and terrifying, earth-shaking and ever resonate chastisement. She was an intimidating woman. It was confirmed in the early 2000s that she had lung cancer. That did not come as much of a surprise to our family. She had been ill for quite some time before the official diagnosis. Aunt Barbara passed away not long after.

I have always had an inclination, as I still do, towards reservation. If the opportunity is available for me to sit quietly in the corner and converse with the nearest dog or cat, I instinctively take that opportunity. I must have been particularly quiet on the way home from the funeral. As we pulled into the driveway, Mom asked if I was okay.

Standing behind Papa, I see him lift his hand and gently place it on the side of the casket.

Softly, he whispers, "I'll miss you, sister."

And it was too much for me then, and even now if I dwell too long. I knew death was the inevitable side-effect of living, but that was the first time I had been close enough to understand its permanent, altering impact on the living. The death happened. It was over, but still, the missing lingers. And so do the stories.

A friend passed this February. When I heard, the first image that came to mind was the smile on her husband's face every single time he said her name. My faith offers comfort in death, and still, I wept. I was broken not for *my* loss, but for the all-encompassing agony calling out to her husband, three children, and four grandchildren. In the inexplicable sadness I saw on their faces, I also glimpsed, bittersweetly, an equal measure of joy. Though robbed of the years Kim deserved, the family was, and continues to be, so proud of the life they lived together. Their family was beautiful. The love they held for one another was sincere, earnest, and honest. That level of commitment demands selflessness.

Love and sacrifice *are* the same. Giving yourself over to love ensures that you'll be broken in time. We are guaranteed of this truth.

In this light, I must question what my self-isolation says about the way I love and the way I show love. I find myself lacking! There cannot be love at a distance. To understand how to selflessly love others, I *must* show that same kindness to myself. It's cyclical. I haven't always done that, especially not here. Too many times have I been told that I'm cutting myself off at the knees.

What expectations do I hold for myself?

I expect greater patience, internally and externally. Kindness, the same. Honesty, the same again! Intention, which demands attention and single-mindedness in the moment. Noticing, which demands an alert distraction, and the dissonance between the two is beautiful. Understanding, in two varieties, the first being the bodily understanding that Diana Kappel-Smith

writes about in *Salt*. She posits, “Perhaps it’s a matter of semantics, but to me the word ‘understand’ means to possess physical knowledge; it means to have a corporeal grasp, a surety that the body owns.” Then there’s the second type that comes, for me, through pursuing faith, which the spirit owns, and offers radical notions of relentless grace, forgiveness, and mercy.

Finally, I expect myself to live with unrepentant honesty and tenderness in equal and full measures. These two reinforce all the others.

These are the lights that guide, both torchbearer and trumpeter.

### III. Stories

*"In the imagination, we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in an embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say, "I" I mean also, "you." And so, together, as one, we shall begin."*

*Spring and All* - William Carlos Williams. 1923.

I love stories and am falling in love with the process of writing. But that love does come at a cost. Each moment I spend writing in the studio is a sacrifice to the tangible work. The time cannot be shared. On second thought, I'm not so sure that the two aren't one now. I could write a chair far faster than I could build one, and surely, you could see them both! Even now, the word "chair" evokes a mental image. They're both chairs, so which is real?

In *On Writing*, Stephen King puts it like this:

"Look- here's a table covered with a red cloth. On it is a cage the size of a small fish aquarium. In the cage is a white rabbit with a pink nose and pink-rimmed eyes... On its back, clearly marked in blue ink, is the numeral 8... The most interesting thing here isn't even the carrot-munching rabbit in the cage, but the number on its back. Not a six, not a four, not nineteen-point-five. It's an eight. This is what we're looking at, and we all see it. I didn't tell you. You didn't ask me. I never opened my mouth and you never opened yours. We're not even in the same *year* together, let alone the same room... except we *are* together. We are close. We're having a meeting of the minds... We're engaged in telepathy. No mythy-mountain shit, real telepathy."

One of the primary tenets of writing good prose is that the author must *show* not *tell*.

I can either say, "He was a very angry man," or, "He never passed on the opportunity to squash an insect on the sidewalk."

This practice offered an olive branch out of an unresolved adherence to my background of traditional woodworking. Too, this requires the imagination of the “reader” to play an equal part in the telling of the narrative, and in so doing, the separation of “I” and “you” becomes less distinct. I am starting the work, you are completing it. Or maybe we are sharing in both beginning and end.

And I’m beginning to love me. Not in a self-absorbed way, just in the manner where I am patient with myself, honest and tender. If the “I” and “you” are losing their discernible borders, and I really am beginning to understand what it means to love me, then I’m also learning to love you.

And love and sacrifice are the same.

In stories, the “I” of me is allowed to step out beyond itself, and the “I” of you is invited to do the same. We meet in a new gathering. Our “I’s” are then intermingling in space beyond our typical reach.

It’s that telekinesis. A meeting of the minds where we are freed, at least for a moment, of our thoughts solely circling around ourselves.

Stories are the one-size-fits-all skeleton key. When the right story meets the right time and place, they unlock something within us that was unknown just moments earlier.

This is still a fledgling in my practice. At times the stories have been very direct, with a narrative that was easy. The work within this thesis body was approached with the mentality of implied narrative, leaving room for others to bring their own thoughts to what their eyes see. Maybe a child sees only the same things they see every single day. After all, it’s not odd for their minds to distort the world around them into fits of laughter and jovialities. “A table with spindly-long legs that looks as if it will creep around the room the very instant I turn away? Yeah, I drew a picture like that two weeks ago.” Maybe an adult sees the work and only vaguely recalls a time when they, like the child, yielded equally strange constructs in their own minds.

#### IV. Credit

*“Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again.”*

*From the Monster - Frankenstein.* Mary Shelley. Published January 1, 1818.

Admittedly, the way I move through and think about my work has been more heavily influenced by artists outside the visual realm, much less the Craft community. Authors that write about the creative process, like Stephen King and Anne Lamott, have proven to be invaluable. King, again, in *On Writing*, wrote, “Put your desk in the corner and remind yourself every time you sit down to write why it’s not in the middle of the room. Life isn’t a support system for art. It’s the other way around.” Asking what the “work is about” never connected with me. The work doesn’t *have* to have a point. My background in traditional Craft convinced me of Louis Sullivan’s ideology that “form follows function,” but that’s not how we live! We walk around with so much darkness seeping into our bones that sometimes it’s all we can do to even function! The work can just strive to evoke something out of reach and that gesture can be *felt*. Not appreciated with the mind, but with the heart.

Comedians like the McElroy family, who started in podcasting, which led to a TV series, a New York Times’ Bestselling graphic novel, and an upcoming five-issue story arc for Marvel comics, have assured that wearing a singular hat isn’t necessary for success. This liberated me once more to request the looming pressure of past work to sit quietly in the corner while I figure some things out. I have a rotating wardrobe of hats I wear now, each of them offering something the others don’t. Some read “art” or “woodwork”, while others read “notice” and “forgive”. All of them fit, and I’m getting better at changing them on the fly.

Equal attention is also due to a few key players in the continued development of my visual vernacular. Katie Hudnall is living proof of studio furniture’s willingness to loosen its definition of “joinery”, to expand beyond the traditional mortise and tenon, dovetail, miter, et cetera. Sometimes, brass hardware is the correct connection. Ellie Richards is a constant reminder of the validity of intuitive making and discovery through playful impulse. Those impulses made even easier when you use scavenged material. Allan Wexler proffered that the absurd doesn’t

care for, and even rejects, practicality. Form can follow function, but absurdity should have a say in the matter. Tom Sachs reminded me that the hand and the heart are connected, regardless of where one places themselves within the art world. Too, Sachs revealed the liberation of working within a constraint. Rules begin providing their own visual lexicon.



Katie Hudnall. *The Seeing Machine*. 2018





Ellie Richards. *At Play*. 2018.



Allan Wexler. *Desk*. 2009.



Tom Sachs. *Untitled (Nikon)*. 1974.

## **V. Bone of My Bone**

From the intro, Genesis. Chapter 2, the first portion of verse 23. After Adam's been knocked out cold and his rib's been yanked out of his chest to form Eve.

Upon waking, Adam, to Eve:

"This, at last, is bone of my bone,  
Flesh of my flesh."

It feels as if, despite my best efforts, I've mismanaged so much time over the past two years. I won't say wasted. It hasn't been wasted. My aim hasn't always been on target. This work feels different. It all started from the focus of thinking beyond "what I wanted to say". I was shaken on how I fit into this Art/Craft world. When I went about looking for the most immediate/greatest impact I could leave behind, the answer came in two waves: the first, teaching in the adjunct capacity I had been hired into and the second, through repairing damages throughout the department that were within the cracks of jurisdiction. After noticing, I felt the responsibility to respond. Regardless of the perceived "effectiveness" of the time I spent within our building/department, I couldn't deny that I had still spent a considerable amount of time here. It began feeling home-ish, and I wanted to take care of it.

From there came the current impulse to restore, edify, and secure. I don't believe that impulse is any different than teaching. The ambition is to continue and enrich the lineage of the craft, of the art, of the ever steady rhythm of the human heart. The "I" of me sees the "I" in you. We are the same, and we deserve the opportunity to feel, understand, and know.

"This, at last, is bone of my bone."

My practice can serve others. A portion can be a sacrifice beyond itself.

And love and sacrifice are the same.



*"Bone of my Bone"*



*"Chair and Han"*



*Table, Jinn, and Biggs*



*Lil Bud and Suzu*

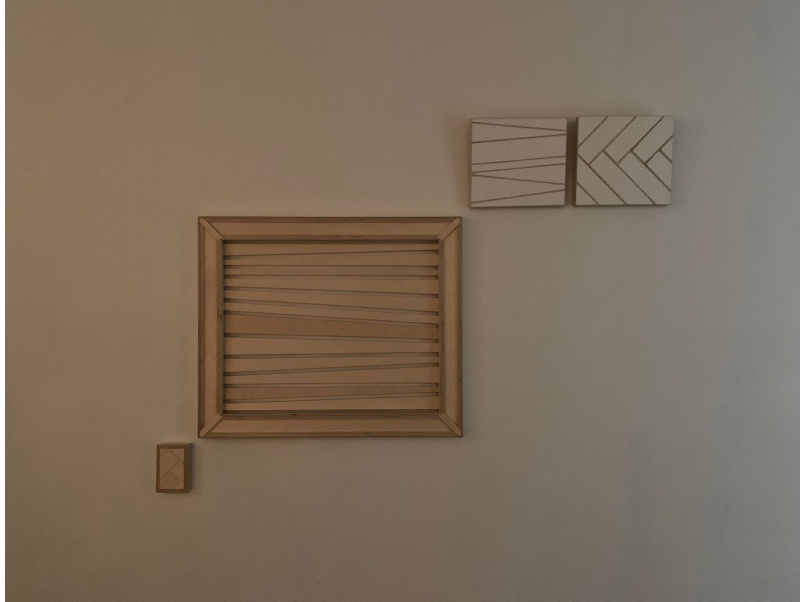




Detail No. 1



Detail No. 2



*Repairs (For the Anderson)*

## VI. Reflections

I'm writing this after the opening reception. It's become important that this writing serve not only as an informant of the work, but to also serve as a personal record of that which has been discovered throughout its creation. I just read the chapter "Living, Thinking, Looking" from Siri Hustvedt's *Variations On Desire*. She begins writing about giving birth to her daughter and the moments that followed. After thirteen hours of labor, and the safe arrival of her child, she recalls her obstetrician checking on her. She writes, "It was an effort to speak, not because I had any pain or even a feeling of exhaustion, but because speech seemed unnecessary. I did manage to breathe out the words that described my condition: 'I'm fine, fine. I've never felt like this. I have no desire, no desire of any kind.'"

It's not the same, I know, but making work as an artist is the closest I'll ever personally come to giving birth. As I read this passage from Hustvedt, the "I" of me started intertwining with the "I" of her, and as she repeats herself two sentences later, she writes the words presently falling from my mouth.

"I have no desire, none, no desire of any kind."

For this reason, for the formlessness I've felt following the opening reception, I will attempt to write the following reflections as if the work is foreign to me.

*"Bone of My Bone"*

*The space is warmly lit. It's cozy, comfortable, homey.*

*The light is emanating from three primary sources, all articulated with arms and legs of beige Baltic birch plywood, with nuts and threaded rod standing in for traditional joinery. Immediately noticeable upon entry into the space is a small table or desk that's sprouted excess appendages. Still though, it looks active, as if it's potentially on the move, frozen in space by my presence. On second look, it's anchored. The lights coming from its rear appear to come from standard work lights. They are hooded and directed by two projector-esque objects extending off the wall. The beams are focused on two missing ceiling tiles. The table's original feet have*



*been made vestigial. One missing foot has altogether been replaced in a similar language as the new legs have been added. The aprons and table top have been stabilized with ply as well. The extension cord for the lights dangles to the floor and snakes towards the middle of the room.*

*The second source of light comes from a chair that's missing an arm, or was missing an arm. Where the appendage used to be is now a column-like leg. It supports the entire chair. The chair "hovers" above the floor by roughly three feet. The column strikes the ground at an angle and breaks off into four primary legs at the bottom and four secondary supports below the larger four. The image is slightly microbial. The chair is supported by this column where its previous arm is missing, and from beneath the seat by an additional articulated arm offering support from below. A light is mounted near the top of the column on an armature of its own and bends around to rest where one's head would land if they were to sit in this chair and slouch. The light beam is focused again by another hooded projector-esque object, this time free-standing. Its neck giraffes awkwardly in front of the chair and it terminates towards the ground with four legs. The light here is focused on an Air Conditioning window unit recessed into the gallery wall. The framing around this recess is a bit wonky and uneven. Screw heads have been poorly hidden by layers of white paint. The extension cord for this light also snakes toward the middle of the room.*

*The third little cluster of objects is another light, with another hooded, directed gaze. This one looks vaguely like a Brachiosaurus. It's neck cranes above its stubby four-legged torso as its head cuts a hard left (to its direction). The beam is focused on an antiquated phone jack half dangling out of the wall. The gallery's own vestigial appendage. The extension cord for this light lazily wraps around itself and illustrates the same intuition as the previous two.*

*The collected extension cords gather in loose circles and begin ascending, not totally intertwined, but not wholly independent either. They meander towards the electrical outlet above. The three become one as they plug into an extension cord splitter and continue upward. A small armature like those seen on the wooden sculptures supports the final path, pulling the splitter towards itself slightly as the cord terminates in the outlet.*

*The final grouping of work is on the wall to your immediate right as you enter the space. It is lit solely by the reflected, ambient light escaping from the back of the hoods, which again are focused on the two missing ceiling tiles, the AC unit recess, and the old phone jack. There are four objects here. All read relatively two dimensionally.*

*From left to right:*

- 1. A small plywood box with a brick-lay pattern on the front.*
- 2. A larger frame capturing slats of various "line weight".*
- 3. A rectangle made of ceiling tile that has been veneered onto ply. It too features rectilinear shapes that seem to vary randomly, perhaps intuitively.*
- 4. Another rectangle at the exact proportions as the former, featuring a similar brick-lay pattern as the small plywood box.*

*All told, there are four lights focusing on four "failures" or faults in the space itself. The sources of that light are, excluding the one reminiscent of a Brachiosaurus, altered and repaired according to their own faults. The four pieces hung on the wall correlate to the faults in the space, repairs in their own right.*

*Closer inspection of the lights and focusing supports reveal pencil marks left behind. Are they remnants of the process of making or decisions left unacted upon?*

*There is a tenderness here. Even the audio spill from the gallery next door plays nicely. There's an unassuming quality to the space. Nothing is willingly drawing attention to itself. Though clearly manipulated, the plywood has not been treated or finished. The faults in the gallery had presumably gone unnoticed prior to the installation of this work. They were happy to go unnoticed for who knows how long. The physical objects themselves are actively trying to draw attention to the faults and not themselves. The proposed repairs to the broken portions of the space, the ones mounted on the wall go totally unlit by direct light. Their surfaces are treated and tampered with, but they're by no means screaming out to be noticed. The only color present beyond the wood tones, the subtle, silvery glint of the hardware joinery, and "gallery white" is the orange extension cord that ties the objects together in the middle of the room. And the tie that binds is fueled by a higher power.*

## VII. Context and Continuing

Artists starting from a point of repair predate me by centuries. The Japanese developed kintsugi in the early 16th, repairing busted ceramics with gold pigment and lacquer.

Faults became undone through their celebration, through elevating them above their former life.

Then there are artists like Lee Mingwei and Michael Swaine that are presently employing the notion of repair through mending garments to generate conversations with people from vastly different walks of life than their own. Mingwei's *The Mending Project* takes place within a gallery context, and Swaine's *Reap What You Sew* happens on the streets of San Francisco with an ice cream style cart on wheels. In both instances, the artists are creating space for personal and intimate conversations with the people that have come to them with worn out clothing. Their work, their craft, their *sacrifice* is to show their love for people with their hands. Craft isn't the direct emphasis, but the vehicle they drive to the ultimate point, to building relations and connections directly with others. Their conversations render the world vastly smaller than it often seems. (Or, *seams*)

The next step beyond this thesis has already begun and will come in two waves. As a final parting, I've asked my committee if there is anything in their studios that needs repair. Following, during, and through the work, I'll continue to write. The two, writing and making, have become entangled. The work is only complete when the two develop alongside one another.

## VIII. Appendix

### I. *What is the purpose/function of making work?*

Purpose:

To constantly unlearn what I know and what I think I know, then remix, revisit, revise, edit, and free up space by the occasional wholesale deletion, then slap all that noise back together and groove.

I have never in my life had any inclination to go skydiving. No bungee jumping, no hang-gliding, none of that. I'm sure between the lines and under the surface, there's an ample amount of self-preservation and fear throwing gasoline on this aversion, but I also just *do not have the interest*.

I was giving my weary ol' foot bones a break and flipping through my phone mindlessly. Up comes a video of two individuals in a sunset free fall. One is in a dark red jumpsuit, the other in navy. They're wearing gray and safety orange helmets respectively. It was a small clip, edited down. There was obviously a third, or we wouldn't have the video, but we just see two bodies slowly revolving around one another, so I'm not sure what get up they're wearing. I can only assume it was something similar given the only difference between the other two is a palette shift.

Here's my brain, now that all this art's gotten up inside there and laid eggs everywhere. It went:

Huh. Skydiving. That's not for mehheheh.

No parachutes out though. Yet, at least.

A free fall. That's pretty hardcore.

Ah, it's kinda like a weird dance they're doing.

A death dance.

A free fall.

I bet I could come up with a pretty cool piece involving a free fall.

Yeah, but it wouldn't be the same work for me if I hired someone else to do the free-falling though.

Yup, when I stumble into the right idea, I'll have to do it. I'll have to Tom Petty it up out there.

And then I snapped to and was disgusted with myself for considering this prospect that had been exiled from my mind *years* ago.

That's the purpose. It's revelling in my unknowing as I perpetually march towards all those words I'm always repeating to myself. (Honesty, tenderness, kindness, et cetera.)

Function:

The function is to convince you, lovingly, to jump outta that plane with me.

## **II. *What do you need/want?***

Oxygen, clean water, sustenance.

Bare minimum for survival.

When it's distilled, that's what I need.

But there are moments when I do need more, when life becomes claustrophobic in absence.

I need mental, cranial freedom. I think if I had to, I could work a routine desk job ad nauseam until I kicked it. But the work would have to be rout enough that my mind could wander wherever it wished.

I should be single-minded on thesis, but even now, I'm sitting on a porch overlooking a hillside.

I see the blue reflection of the house on my mug as I raise it to my lips. My breathing is only slightly labored. The ever so subtle rasp of my lungs is well hidden under the sound of the rocker to my right. These old lungs are in pretty good shape for the shape they're in! The

occupants legs are bouncing up and down gleefully. Their feet can't reach the porch, so they're throwing their entire body around to keep the proper rhythm.

The familiar gentle scuffling of dishes washed and dried seeps through the open window to my left. A little voice erupts, "All done!" and its echo comes in laughter and applause.

Kay is in the yard, wearing a floppy, wide-brimmed hat, gardening gloves, and a flowy sundress. She looks up with a small start as a spade and rake clash against one another. Two small faces glare upon one another in mimicked grimace. They are locked in a battle that began a long time ago, far, far away from here. Kay smiles, raising her hand to lend aid to the younger that's just cried, "Help!" in the most theatrical performance they could muster.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. The play is too engrossing to look away. There's intrigue and drama and I can't quite be bothered to see what the owner of the hand wants. By the time the good guys have won, the hand is long gone and my coffee's been topped off before I had a chance to say thank you.

But they know.

I look to my right. The little legs are still kicking away.

Drawing the words out slowly, I ask, "Sooooooo, how's livin'?"

A voice only recently accustomed to full sentences answers confidently, "Ooooh, it's pretty good, Papa."

And that name once belonged to others, but it's mine now, and I've never stopped telling the stories of the ones that held it before me.

Sure, it's want now, but should those days come, I don't believe that word will be strong enough.

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*Small Victories* - Anne Lamott.  
*Stitches* - Anne Lamott.  
*Tenth of December* - George Saunders  
*This is Water - Commencement Speech* - David Foster Wallace  
*To Kill a Mockingbird* - Harper Lee.  
*Ultimate Spider-Man #1 - #50* - Various writers  
*What I Loved* - Siri Hustvedt